Aristotle's Theory of Predication[1]

Richard McKirahan

How to understand ἐστι in the Greek philosophers is an old and formidable problem. The effort to identify the 'is' of existence, of predication, of identity, of constitution, of instantiation, etc. — either on their own or in 'fused' forms exercised interpreters for most of the twentieth century and promises to continue well into the twenty-first.

Every first semester Greek student learns that the word in question occurs both with and without an accent (more precisely, it can be either non-enclitic or enclitic): ἔστι and ἐστι, that it occurs with one and with two complements: 'ἔστι S' and 'S ἐστι P', that in ordinary Greek it has at least two meanings: 'exists' and 'is', and that the accented form frequently means 'exists' (although not always: it can also mean 'it is possible', and since it is always accented when it is the first word in a sentence, and since frequently the first word in the sentence is the most emphatic, it can mean just 'is' too). There is no direct correlation between these semantic and syntactic distinctions. It is not true that accented ἔστι always means 'exists' even at the beginning of a sentence or even when it has only one complement.

If these are the data, the questions of how to analyse them, or how to understand philosophers' uses and analyses of them naturally arise. Does a given philosopher use ἐστι in different ways? Does he recognise and discuss the meanings and uses of ἐστι? Does he regard one of them

1 A review of Allan T. Bäck, *Aristotle's Theory of Predication*, Philosophia Antiqua, vol. 84. Leiden, Boston and Köln, Brill, 2000. Pp. iv + 346. US$105.00. ISBN 90-041-1719-9.

APEIRON a journal for ancient philosophy and science
0003-6390/2001/3404 321-328 $4.00 ©Academic Printing & Publishing

as primary and the others as reducible to it, or does he consider there to be irreducibly different meanings and uses? Further, does he argue for these views?

In the case of Aristotle, the theses and discussions that bear on these issues are found principally in the logical and metaphysical treatises, and contain not only the forms ἐστι and ἔστι but other forms of the verb to be, εἶναι. They range from his divisions of ὄντα (entities, things that 'are' in some sense of that word) and his paraphrasings of ἐστι as 'is said of' and 'is in', to his claim that τὸ ὄν ('what is') is said in many ways, to the importance in his philosophy of definition (τί ἐστι, literally, 'what is' or 'what it is') and essence (τί ἦν εἶναι, literally, 'what it was for ... to be' or 'what being is for ... '), to his view that all declarative sentences are equivalent to statements of the form 'S ἐστι P', where S is a subject and P is an attribute, to the fact that he structured his logic on the basis of such subject-attribute sentences, to his assertion that the four kinds of scientific inquiries are of the forms εἰ ἔστι ('if it is'), τί ἐστι ('what it is'), ὅτι (sc. ἐστι) ('that [it is the case]'), and διότι (sc. ἐστι) ('why [sc. it is the case]').

According to the dominant view, in Aristotle 'ἐστι' changes its logical function and meaning according to its sentential context. Broadly speaking (to avoid the problems raised three paragraphs above) in a statement of the form 'ἔστι S' ('S is') it makes an existence claim, while in a statement of the form 'S ἐστι P' ('S is P') it has no meaning, but only connects the predicate term to the subject: 'S is P' asserts only that 'P' belongs to 'S' and makes no existence claim (98). Bäck calls this the Copulative Theory of Predication (CTP) and argues that it presents problems. For example, it jumbles syntactic and semantic considerations together, and so fails to reveal the logical structure of statements (17). Bäck's thesis is that Aristotle held instead a different theory, the Aspect Theory of Predication (ATP).

Bäck has identified a significant problem in Aristotle which has contemporary philosophical relevance because of its links with the modern debate over the truth-value of propositions with non-existent subjects. Since there are indeed problems with the common interpretation, it is important to investigate other possibilities, particularly since, as Bäck points out, Aristotle never states or argues for the commonly held interpretation. It is impossible to do justice to the book in the short space of a review, and there are many well founded ideas (one example: the view that Aristotle is not engaged in analysing ordinary Greek, but develops a technical protocol language that reflects his ontology) that deserve discussion. I have decided not to pursue the evident philosophi-

cal interest of ATP or its historical lineage on which Bäck seems particularly well versed. (In fact, the book stems from an article in which Bäck discussed ATP as it was held by Avicenna and other Islamic philosophers [1].) Instead I shall take a critical look at some of the evidence on which Bäck relies as support for his claim that Aristotle held ATP. Although I believe that there are objections to taking these passages the way Bäck does, I do see the book as a useful exploration of an interesting alternative.

Unlike Kahn, who takes the copulative use of 'ἐστι' as primitive and its use as 'exists' as later and derivative, Bäck's thesis is that the existential use is original and basic (17). Moreover, the basic use of ἐστι is to indicate existence in the sense of real presence that can be specified further (4), where 'presence' means 'not mere "existence" but "existence together with a copulative function" ' (xiii). Thus, 'a simple assertion, of form "S is P", is a disguised conjunction: "S exists and P is predicated of S" ' (3). Bäck calls this view ATP, which he sets out as follows: 'a categorical sentence of the form "S is P" is to be read as "S is (existent) as a P." The copula "is" asserts the claim of existence; the predicate "P", if there be a further predicate, gives further information as to how S exists, namely, as a P. In the case of a sentence where the copula is not stated explicitly, as in "S P's", this theory claims that it is nevertheless there implicitly. "S P's" is to be read as "S is (existent) as a P", and treated as above. The existence claim is fundamental for all assertions in the present indicative tense; a predicate merely gives further determinations of the existence claim' (11).

Already there are problems. First, we may wonder why it is an *aspect* theory of existence. It seems unlikely that in the case that 'Socrates is pale' means that Socrates exists as pale, that we have to do with an aspect of *existence*, at least if 'aspect' carries its normal senses of a character or feature, or a way in which something can be regarded. It seems more like an aspect of *Socrates*. But this interpretation will not satisfy, since we do not want 'aspect theory of predication' to reduce to 'predicate theory of predication'. Is it an aspect of *Socrates's* existence? 'Socrates exists as pale' may indeed appear to be making the claim that the way in which Socrates exists is *qua* a pale thing, but this makes it sound as if being pale is (or is part of) Socrates' essence — an implausible claim and certainly one that Aristotle would consider false; 'Socrates exists as a man' would have a better chance of success, but ATP is not restricted to essential predications. Also it seems different from the 'disguised conjunction' theory: 'S is (existent) as a P' does not look equivalent to 'S exists and P is predicated of S'. Bäck forestalls objections along these lines by giving an unexpected

rendering of 'is (existent) as a P': 'Socrates is just' is to be read as 'Socrates is existent as just' (and is true if and only if Socrates is existent and Socrates is just (2). So the two formulations of the theory are only superficially different. We can simply substitute the conjunction for the 'existent as' locution. In that case, it simply remains unclear what *aspects* have to do with the theory. And it is also unclear how the existential use is prior to the copulative use, since they are both present.

Bäck admits (1) that he cannot prove that Aristotle explicitly states or holds ATP. He cautiously maintains the weaker claim that Aristotle's remarks about and uses of predication are consistent with ATP, and he maintains that ATP explicates Aristotle's remarks about and uses of predication better than other theories, such as CTP. Bäck first considers the linguistic evidence in Aristotle for the plausibility of ATP. He states that linguistic usage sets a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the success of ATP, and shows that ATP meets that condition (ch. 1). After a chapter (ch. 2) in which he finds that Parmenides and Plato treated ἐστι as having a single, 'fused' sense of stating existence of the subject together with the subject's attribute, he looks at Aristotle's theoretical remarks on predication and determines whether Aristotle holds the theory, and whether implicitly or explicitly. He concludes that Aristotle holds the theory explicitly but considers it so obvious that it does not require extensive explicit elaboration. He also shows that the applicability and plausibility of ATP is not limited to Greek, by showing that other people with different native languages have held it.

Bäck begins his examination of Aristotle (ch. 3) by looking at the remarks on the meanings of 'be', mainly as given in *Metaphysics* Δ 7. He argues that they are consistent with ATP, and further that ATP explains some of the ways in which Aristotle wants to emend and make more precise the usage of 'be'. However, much of Bäck's discussion is vitiated by his misunderstanding of being *per se* at 1017a22-31. Bäck's translation of the passage (70) gets off to a bad start: either it translates the first sentence of the passage twice or it supplies a sentence not in the text. It also mistranslates a27 as saying ' "be" signifies the same as each of these' instead of '... the same for each ...' (although the correct translation is given on pp. 78 and 79). (Mistranslations, and misspellings and mistakes in accenting Greek words are pervasive; n.b. 'I translate all passages myself' [xiv].) But most importantly, although the passage clearly talks of *things* and declares that everything is *per se* that the figures of predication signify (roughly, that everything that is in any category is *per se* — a surprising statement in its own right; contrast *Posterior Analytics* 73b5-10, which says more expectedly that things are *per se* that are not

said of some other underlying subject), Bäck construes it as talking about *statements*, and saying that 'statements with predicates in any category are said to be *per se*' (70). Since Bäck rightly holds that Aristotle's discussion of being *per accidens* (1017a7-22) has to do with accidental predication (66-7), this when combined with his interpretation of being *per se* as a doctrine of predication leads him to the unexpected conclusion that a single statement can be both *per accidens* and *per se*. 'A man walks' is accidental, because walking belongs accidentally to the man, and it is *per se*, because both man and walking are *per se*. (This is Bäck's paradigmatic example, but Aristotle presents it at 1017a29-30 as an example not of being *per se*, but of how a sentence like 'a man walks' [with an indicative verb] is equivalent to 'a man is walking' [subject - copula - predicate], so as to make the doctrine of being *per se* apply to the designata of verbs as well as to those of nouns and adjectives.) This is the star passage for Bäck's claim that Aristotle states the key features of ATP — that 'an affirmation of being *per se* states that the subject exists, *in re*, and that this assertion may be qualified further, via a term from one of the categories' (96).

The following five chapters (chs. 4-8) examine Aristotle's logical writings in order to determine whether he holds ATP there, and, if so, whether explicitly or implicitly. The discussion is divided into treatments of the following topics: the statement (ch. 4), the figures of predication, i.e., the categories (ch. 5), types of predication (ch. 6), negation (ch. 7), and inference (ch. 8). Bäck claims that 'Aristotle does maintain ATP in his logical works' although 'he does not state it too clearly,' and 'that ATP fits Aristotle's texts a lot better than its competitors,' especially CTP (98).

The discussion of statements (100 ff.) is clear and helpful. I disagree, however, with the claim (106) that Aristotle's basic example of a verb is 'to be'. In the passages Bäck cites (16b3, b22-3, 17a12) forms of 'to be' are not actually called verbs but seem to be treated as combining with predicate expressions to make verbs. And at *de Int* 19b14-17, where Bäck speaks of 'a man is' and 'a man is not' as 'the *primary* affirmation and negation,' and takes 'primary' in the sense of 'fundamental' or 'basic', πρώτη need only mean 'first' (Ackrill), which I take to mean 'simplest', and indeed such statements are simpler than the more complex ones with predicate complements, which Aristotle immediately afterwards goes on to discuss. So this passage is not strong evidence that the basic form of the affirmative statement is of the form 'S is', which means 'S exists', where the existence of S may be qualified further (by a predicate complement) (107). Bäck finds further evidence for ATP in the immedi-

ately following passage (19b19-22), which states that in subject - copula - predicate statements, ' "is" is predicated additionally as a third thing,' that in the statement 'a man is just', ' "is" is a third component — whether name or verb — in the affirmation' (tr. Ackrill). He interprets προσκατηγορεῖσθαι, (the verb translated 'predicated additionally') to mean that the verb makes two predications, one of the subject and one of the predicate. In 'S is P' it means 'S is (i.e., exists) and P is said of (is predicated of) S' (108). But this is a forced reading of the passage, which is most easily taken as simply identifying cases where 'is' is an additional element in the statement alongside S and P. Further, the evidence offered for the unexpected interpretation of προσκατηγορεῖσθαι appears to be a reference to a discussion not of this verb but of προσσημαίνειν on p. 105.

The relevance of ATP to Aristotle's logic might seem to be slight, given the prevalence in the *Analytics* of statements of the form 'P belongs to (ὑπάρχει + dative) S' over statements of the form 'S is (ἐστι) P'. Bäck recognises this fact and correctly points out that ὑπάρχειν means 'exist' as well as 'belong to'. He accordingly understands 'P belongs to (ὑπάρχει + dative) S' as meaning that P exists in S (128). But even if this is correct, it does not fit ATP's analysis of 'S is P', in which the existence of S is asserted, not that of P.

I conclude my comments on this main section of the book with some remarks on the claim that 'perhaps the strongest evidence in his logical writings that Aristotle uses and explicitly accepts the aspect theory of predication comes from his discussion of stages of inquiry in demonstration' (158). Bäck has in mind the four objects of investigation discussed in *Posterior Analytics* II 1-2, which he renders as 1) S is [existence], 2) what S is [definition], 3) that S is P [fact], 4) because [rather, why] S is P [reason]. He holds (although this goes beyond the text) that inquiry proceeds by going through these stages one after another (158-60), that we first determine whether or not something exists and only if it does do we go on to inquire after its definition. Once we have that, we investigate facts about the existent thing, and, finally, we look for the reason why those facts hold. Thus, Aristotle is interested in both existence and predication. Bäck also holds that a necessary truth condition for a statement 'S is P' is that S exists, that statements of existence must be able to be expanded ('Socrates is' requires that Socrates be a human being, i.e., a rational animal) and that from there the expansion goes on to include all the predicates (both essential and accidental) of S (160-1). And he takes Aristotle's assertion that if we know what S is we also know that S exists (92b4-8) to agree with the thesis of ATP that 'every statement of defini-

tion makes a statement of existence: "man is a rational animal" asserts that man exists as a rational animal' (161).

While some of this interpretation is defensible, what I find most problematic is that it ignores the fact (or if not the fact, at least the widespread view) that demonstrative sciences are based (*inter alia*) on two sorts of 'proper' principles: existence-claims and definitions. The former assert that the basic entities treated by a science exist (and these are universals, not particulars), and the latter tell what those entities are, in the sense of stating their essence. Both kinds of principles are needed precisely because neither does the work of the other. Existence claims assert existence and do not state the nature of the entity or otherwise describe it. A definition presupposes (not asserts — a crucial difference from the point of view of fitting Aristotle into contemporary discussions, and one which Bäck frequently seems to fudge) the existence of the definiendum; if it is a basic entity, its existence is asserted separately in an 'hypothesis', and if it is not a basic entity, its existence is demonstrated to follow from the existence of basic entities. The *Posterior Analytics* consistently treats the two kinds of principles, and thus the two kinds of statements, as performing different tasks and as not being reducible either to the other. It follows that Aristotle's insistence on distinguishing the question whether something exists from the other questions he discusses in II 1-2 agrees very well with his taxonomy of scientific principles and tells strongly against ATP's thesis that existence is actually asserted in definitions and other statements of the form 'S is P', not strongly for it. The final chapter (ch. 9) does three things. First, it summarizes the results of the previous discussion while also showing how ATP is superior to CTP. Second, it traces the historical development of Aristotelian theories of predication from the Stoics to Brentano, arguing that the influence of Aquinas, who followed Boethius in supporting CTP eventually caused ATP to lose the prominence it enjoyed in the Middle Ages, when it was maintained by Avicenna, Ockham and Buridan. Third, it discusses the adequacy of ATP as a logical theory of predication, comparing it, in ways favorably, with classical Frege-Russell logic. 'The adequacy of any interpretation rests finally on how well it explains the details of the text' (265), which is to say that an interpretation, no matter how philosophically superior it may be, cannot be accepted without strong textual support. I have not dwelt on Bäck's arguments for the philosophical advantages of ATP over CTP or its other rivals, but have looked at some of the key texts on which the interpretation is based and which, it seems to me, do not support it. How well those passages

support CTP or other interpretations of Aristotle's views on predication is a subject well beyond the scope of this review.

Pomona College
Claremont, CA 19711
U.S.A.
rmckirahan@pomona.edu